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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000439

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/24/2017

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [BO](#)

SUBJECT: UNITED CIVIC PARTY CHAIRMANSHIP NOT CHANGING HANDS

REF: A. MINSK 415

[1](#)B. MINSK 399

[1](#)C. MINSK 438

[1](#)D. 06 MINSK 1225

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) No one within the United Civic Party appears capable of challenging current Chair Anatoliy Lebedko for the party's leadership. Lebedko saw his already formidable position within the party strengthened by the battles within the opposition in the run up to the May 26-27 congress. Influential figures currently outside opposition politics could mount a challenge, but would only do so once assuming the leadership of an opposition party would provide a path to power within government. With support for the UCP stuck in the single digits, risking everything to unseat Lebedko remains highly unattractive to influential Belarusians. End summary.

No Current Party Member Looking to Unseat Lebedko

[1](#)2. (C) Leading United Civic Party (UCP) members separately told Deputy Pol/Econ Chief Chair Anatoliy Lebedko currently enjoys strong support in the party and that no party member is seriously contemplating unseating Lebedko in next year's UCP congress. UCP Honorary Chair Stanislav Bogdankevich described the party as full of sharp people but said no one else in the party is able to implement as well as Lebedko. Deputy Igor Shinkarik speculated that the results of next year's party congress would likely approximate those of last year's, when Lebedko stood unopposed and was supported by nearly 90 percent of delegates.

[1](#)3. (C) Deputy Lyudmila Gryaznova, a former member of Charter 97 and the strongest supporter of Aleksandr Milinkevich within the UCP, said Lebedko had created a party based more on loyalty than talent. Gryaznova thought prominent economist Yaroslav Romanchuk is the only UCP deputy at all interested in becoming Chair, but granted he was primarily an analyst at heart and was not campaigning for the position. Bogdankevich said younger party members had not yet proved themselves sufficiently to challenge for leadership. UCP's most prominent youth member, Denis Denisov, affirmed to Poloff Lebedko's position is safe.

Threat of Milinkevich's Chairmanship Boosted Cohesion

[1](#)4. (C) In contrast to the Belarusian National Front (ref A), the debate over Aleksandr Milinkevich's role within the

opposition strengthened Lebedko's position within UCP. Gryaznova said most party members voted for the positions Lebedko favored in the regional opposition conferences (ref B). She also complained Lebedko had used the conflict to tighten control over the UCP's well-known website (www.ucpb.org). Shinkarik claimed some party members are especially sympathetic toward Lebedko when he takes on Milinkevich. (Note: Apart from Gryaznova, no UCP activist we spoke with viewed Milinkevich, whatever his merits, as a good leader for the United Democratic Forces. End note.)

#### Challengers from Outside the Party Unlikely in Near Future

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15. (C) UCP co-founder Aleksandr Dobrovolskiy said many in positions of power despise Lukashenko. However, Dobrovolskiy acknowledged that any defector would find it hard to transition to opposition politics where they could not lead through fiat as in business or government. UCP Political Council member Sergey Alfer told Deputy Pol/Econ Chief that if the regime began to show signs of weakness, strong figures -- such as business leaders in exile -- could contend for party leadership. He averred that presently such heavyweights see little value in leading an opposition party.

#### Comment: Secure Enough to Focus Beyond Narrow Support Base?

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16. (C) After the politically dead summer, we hope to see Lebedko and Kalyakin (ref C), secure in their positions, concentrate on increasing their popularity within society rather than maneuvering against Milinkevich and other would-be allies. Until that happens, the party leaders' support will likely be stuck in the low single digits (ref D).

MINSK 00000439 002 OF 002

Stewart